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Direct to Video: Rewriting the Literacy Narrative

AS EARLY AS 2003, MELISSA MEEKS AND ALEX ILYASOVA could survey the "new and exciting" use of digital video in composition classrooms, noting the sorts of multiliteracy that Stuart Selber advocates and engaging students in prosumer activities. Digital video production has, according to Meeks and Ilsayova's interviewees, a number of benefits, including its power "to engage many literacies at once"; its stimulation of collaboration and participation; and its involvement of "students in a rich composition process" (Meeks and Ilsayova). More recently—and these are only a few examples—Jeannie Parker Beard describes making use of cell phone video and YouTube, among other technologies, for a first-year writing class's final project, "proposal documentaries" (2010); Claire Lutkewitte explores a variety of Web 2.0 technologies (including YouTube) with her first-year writing classes; and in an installation for the 2010 Computers and Writing Conference, Bill Wolff showcased a year's worth of student videos created in an upper-division writing course, videos that challenged viewers "to rethink traditional concepts that so often seem fixed in meaning and performance: text, research, writing, composition, among others." Indeed, this compositing modality is deeply rhetorical, as Gunther Kress notes in his discussion of multimodal design, which works "to present, to realize, at times to (re-)contextualize social positions and relations, as well as knowledge in specific arrangements for a specific audience. At all points, design realizes and projects social organization and is affected by social and technological change" (*Multimodality* 139).

We agree. However, as we consider composition courses that experiment with and include video production as part of their work,

we note that some anxieties about media production often manifest as a privileging of traditional textual modalities of meaning-making, even as instructors (seemingly) embrace newer forms of delivery. In this chapter, we offer our thoughts on how composition's embrace of digital video often invites students to participate in the production of multimedia texts but, at the same time, often separates those texts from a robust consideration of the rhetorical affordances of video. In the process, we argue, students'—and our own—understanding of multimedia, multimodality, and digital composition is impoverished and emptied of much critical and rhetorical possibility. As Meeks and Ilyasova's interviewees point out,

> *Knowing rhetoric may not license us to create and critique anything and everything.* . . . [Film] studies and film production have bodies of knowledge and sets of inquiry tools all their own. Though rhetoric can certainly facilitate the effective use of digital video in the classroom, we must begin to be more intentional in our borrowing from the professional programs and academic disciplines that have been using these media longer, with more sophistication. (Meeks and Ilsayova; authors' emphasis)

We argue that preparing our students for literate participation in complex, multicultural public spheres may very well mean equipping them with this more robust vocabulary of textual, visual, and multimodal meaning-making—a vocabulary that should also include the nonrational, the alternative, the knowledges of the body, and the avant-garde as part of its critical lexicon.

To be clear: our goal here is not to argue against including digital video production in the writing classroom; we believe—and assume a belief in our readership—that engaging multimodality is a pressingly necessary task for a wide variety of composition and writing studies courses. Video composing has become a key modality of meaning-making among younger generations of college students, so developing a critically literate approach to such textual production seems crucial. At the same time, we question our field's approach to and use of such texts in the composition classroom.

How critical and complex is that approach? To what extent do we ignore a rich history of multimedia in order to colonize the production of such texts with our compositional aims, biases, and predispositions?

VIDEO AS REPLICATION OF THE ESSAY

Innovative programs in writing studies foster growing interest in the creation of video "texts," providing computer access, software, and instruction. At the University of Texas, for instance, *TheJUMP*—the *Journal for Undergraduate Multimedia Projects* (jump.dwrl.utexas.edu)—is an online resource and repository for students' multimedia work. According to *TheJUMP*'s website, the journal is dedicated to:

> providing an outlet for the excellent and exceedingly rhetorical digital/multimedia projects occurring in undergraduate courses around the globe, and to providing a pedagogical resource for teachers working with (or wanting to work with) "new media." The journal is designed to be not only a repository for quality multimedia scholarship—bringing together some of the most rhetorically creative and rhetorically impactful works produced/composed by our undergraduates—but also, unlike its digital brethren (i.e., megarepositories like YouTube), it seeks to also offer a critical perspective.
>
> As such, the projects we publish include assignment descriptions from the courses in which they originated, reflections by the instructors involved, and design rationales or process/product reflections by the author(s)/composer(s) themselves. In these reflection pieces, the creators attempt to critically consider their design/production choices and/or the intent of their projects in light of their rhetorical message, their "composing" process, and the technologies involved.

As a resource for faculty interested in learning how to design multimedia assignments, *TheJUMP* offers some of the most tried-and-true aspects of composition pedagogy, including the "meta-reflection" or "writer's memo" in which students discuss the particular

rhetorical choices they made in the composition of their multimedia texts. As a showcase for student work, *TheJUMP* presents viewers with an array of creative projects, experimenting with audio, visual, and textual production in often highly effective—and affecting—ways.

As just one example among many, the short film "Closer," by Kyle Kim (jump.dwrl.utexas.edu/old/content/kk), presents a young man playing chess and eating a bagel alone in a cafe. He gets up to get a drink and a young woman sits down at the chess table. Instead of joining her, he moves to another table to await her eventual departure. The video has no dialogue or narration, save for a movingly performed song in French ("Une Nouvelle Histoire" by DoKashiteru). An accompanying text reveals that the video "was part of the course's final project assignment of the intensive 'January Term' at Whitworth University, and it asked students to find a way to merge audio, video, and text into a coherent narrative." Essentially a music video, "Closer" quite effectively generates a pathos-laden argument about what it means to interact and become "close" to others. However, in Kim's reflection on his work, he notes the ways in which his thinking about the composing process for his video benefited from thinking critically about past experiences in purely *textual* production:

> Most journalism students are taught to craft stories within a more traditional medium of print (with words or through photojournalism). Experiencing a process that was more artistic than creating journalistic prose made me compare and contrast different methods and approaches with the kind of storytelling I am used to doing. In journalism, reporters are ethically limited as to how a story is carried out (research, interviewing and writing style, to name a few of those limitations). With my short fictional film, I found myself given more leeway in tone, style and implementation; bias, fairness and objectivity were irrelevant issues in this case. It is even arguable that in fiction bias is an intricate component of the story (e.g., point of view/narration, character portrayal,

> theme and representation). Most common biases in journalism come from taking quotes and facts out of context. In terms of video, post production is the area where bias can easily creep in. How scenes are edited and spliced together naturally creates a certain point-of-view. However, this project required intentionally emphasizing a point of view, and it was interesting to produce with journalistic training that has taught me to combat such biases.

Such reflection reveals a laudable critical engagement with the particular rhetorical capabilities—and potential pitfalls—of different genres, contrasting the need for critical awareness of bias in journalism with the greater "leeway" given bias in fiction. Moreover, Kim notes that the *material* processes of creating the video—"How scenes are edited and spliced together"—become an integral part of creating a point of view.

Certainly, Kim seems to have learned about different modalities of media production, and his instructor seemed quite pleased with the results, writing that the video "is a fine example of both a desired product from the course and a desired process from the course, contributing to Kyle's sophistication as a reader of multimedia compositions and to his expertise as a sophisticated, ethical maker of such compositions for the world of online journalism." The instructor's aims in the original assignment were admittedly open-ended:

> Earlier projects consider the joining of images and words, the ways that visual design conveys meaning, the capture and editing of audio, and basic cinematography. The challenge of the final assignment is to pull together as many of those strands as possible into one coherent package that will include, at least, images, sounds, and text.

This assignment leaves a great deal of wiggle room in which the student can experiment. Curiously, however, the instructor's potential textual biases find perhaps some expression in one paragraph worth quoting in full:

> Viewed in terms of the basic project requirements, "Closer" is undeniably excellent but—skewed as it is toward cinematography—might be called weak in its integration of text. That shortcoming vis-à-vis the basic instructions highlights the need for flexible requirements in multimedia assignments, which can move in unpredictable directions during production. In this case, Kyle talked with me about the project as he developed it, and I could see that what he had in mind would be both a suitable capstone for the course and a valuable exercise for Kyle as a journalist. Kyle thought (correctly) of his tasteful credits and titling as a way to include text, and the harmony of those texts with the other visual and aural elements here speaks to his grasp of visual design. He also included a shot of a novel by Ken Kesey (best known for *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*), and that strikes me as another thematically appropriate use of text. While the "perfect" response to this assignment would likely do more with text, the assignment's parameters allow me to reward the learning, creativity, and labor behind a piece like "Closer," and the rubric makes it possible for a project to be weak in one area and still score quite well overall.

Despite the instructor's call for more "text," he notes that such assignments require greater flexibility in assessment; the nature of experimenting and producing such work, according to the instructor, might move one in "unpredictable directions"—that is, away from the standard kinds of textual production that this instructor is more comfortable assessing.

The editors of *TheJUMP* note in the "About" section on their site that such unpredictability forms a key part of work in multimedia production. One aim of *TheJUMP*, they write, is to create dialogue and discussion about what they call the "murkiness" of this work: "The pedagogical focus of this e-journal is critical to its success as we not only want to see really great projects and the assignments/prompts (and courses) that gave them shape, we also want to consider and work through the nuances of critique, assessment, impact, and so on (often the more murky areas associated with digital

multimedia productions)." For us, that murkiness manifested itself in the assessment of "Closer." Some of that murkiness stems from the sheer plethora of video possibilities; for instance, other videos in the same "issue" of *TheJUMP* in which Kim's video appears vary markedly in genre and tone. Whereas Kim offers us a music video, for example, Sarah Gould offers "A Closer Look into Physical Disabilities: An Oral History Video," which functions more like a documentary video project. Further exploration of *TheJUMP* reveals even greater generic divergence—which is only to be expected as students play with the possibilities of video production.

The murkiness that Kim's instructor and the editors of *TheJUMP* point to is perhaps more their problem than the students'. After all, Kim himself notes that working with fiction and working with video are *different*. Certainly, what is at least partly at play here is the move from nonfiction to fiction as genre. As Kim points out in his insightful reflection, however, what is also at play are different modalities of editing, of actual *production*, that affect how one composes. By comparison, his instructor's commentary about the "unpredictable directions" of such production seems, well, old-fashioned, even conservative. To his credit, the instructor allows his writing students to experiment with multimedia; in fact, it's a requirement for the course. However, his *thinking* about such multimedia seems to rely more on privileging some media rather than just distinguishing between them. This kind of thinking favors the textual over other forms of communication; note, for instance, how he calls Kim's work "skewed" toward "cinematography." In other words, this work—as "undeniably excellent" as it is—isn't really writing, and that's a problem—for the instructor. Kim understands that distinction, as articulated in his reflection, and the instructor is rolling with the changes, as it were. But we hear some potential anxiety in his recognition of the "unpredictable directions" this work might take.

Such anxiety is certainly understandable. More traditional modalities of literacy and meaning-making seem to be shunted aside for the newfangled, glitzy multimedia. We are not concerned here, however, with those arguments, and we assume that, given sufficient time, literacy practices just change. And we cannot stop them from changing, so we attempt to offer students a diversity of literate practices and ways of knowing. We *are* concerned with how we as literacy instructors and writing teachers adapt to such changes, incorporating the new literacy practices into our curricula, our pedagogies, and our understanding of what it means to be literate—our *ideologies of literacy*. How do we react to and understand the "unpredictable directions" of incorporating new media into our writing classrooms?

One response to the unpredictability of video is to use it in service of more traditional, writerly composition. We have all probably seen a popular assignment—the video literacy narrative—that has produced any number of visual vignettes through which students learn new technological skills and discover something important about the development of their own and other people's literacy practices. One syllabus presents the assignment thusly:

> For this assignment, you have the opportunity to argue for a particular understanding of literacy by telling a literacy story and then justifying that story's academic rigor. Literacy narratives, as the Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives explains, are stories about reading (books, cereal boxes, music, websites, magazines, signs) and composing (letters, Facebook pages, songs, maps, blogs, papers) in any form or context. Literacy narratives often include poignant memories that involve a personal experience with literacy. Digital literacy narratives are the same kinds of stories told through the use of digital media (iMovie, MovieMaker, Sophie). (Gogan)

Several years ago a number of these video narratives were on display at the 2008 Watson Conference in Louisville, to great acclaim. Increasingly, time and space are set aside at our national conferences and on our campuses to present, view, and laud work produced in response to such assignments—work that reflects on issues of textuality and communication in rich digital formats. For example, UC Irvine recently sponsored, as part of its yearly writing awards, a new award for "Best Multimedia Text." The winning entry, "On

Bad Language," was a video essay about how foul words have rhetorical uses, even if such uses are sharply context-dependent. The author reflects critically on her own literacy practices and analyzes a series of comedy routines and news reports in which foul language serves a strong rhetorical purpose. Clips from routines and reports appear as supporting examples. Note how we describe "On Bad Language" as a "video essay" with clips as "supporting examples." The video essay is perfectly fine in its own right. However, many such texts are overwhelmingly linear in structure, with stated theses and expository narratives, and occasionally with obligatory references to experts. In short, they transport all of the elements of more traditional print texts into another medium, another modality of delivery.

We pause to wonder what else can be done—rhetorically—with this assignment, with this call for students to think about literacy through the delivery of new media. Do such assignments simply replicate essayistic forms in new media? Look back at the assignment, which baldly states that digital literacy narratives are the "same kinds of stories told through the use of digital media." We argue that such a formulation elides a rich consideration of the canon of delivery and its potential impact both on how we understand literate and communicative action and how we represent such action. Put bluntly, we believe that a good deal of contemporary composition practice uses new media and new media tools to replicate and reproduce some of its own cherished forms and genres. We focus here in particular on the video literacy narrative because of its prominence in so many composition programs, which see in it a way to bridge textual and multimedia literacies.

To catch a broad sense of what kinds of videos are produced in comp courses, we sampled a number of videos, working with our graduate students to collect readily accessible video literacy narratives on YouTube, where they are often posted. Two caveats about this survey are vital to consider here. First, while our sample is relatively small, only a hundred of the thousands that exist, we believe it indicates—and informs—the kinds of work produced in response to the video literacy assignment. Second, and more important, we recognize that not all such assignments are the same; some require greater depth of thought and use of available technologies than others. We did not have access to the original assignments that produced these videos, and we do not know the "grades" that students received on their videos. Therefore, we cannot measure the quality of the videos in relation to either the specific assignment or the rubrics used in the course contexts in which they were produced. So our assessment of the students' work might seem unfair. But our goal is not to assess or critique the individual student work, but rather to catch a glimpse of what kinds of videos students produce in writing courses. The sample is necessarily biased in that not all courses require their students to post the videos to YouTube or other publicly accessible forums. We want to know, however roughly, what kinds of qualities characterize students' work with video literacy production—at least as revealed through a sampling of such videos posted on YouTube. And while we cannot generalize from our sample to all such work with video in the field of composition studies, we are nonetheless struck by some consistent strains and predilections in our sample.

As one example, Eric Wooten's "Literacy Narrative" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QOgUsHEQUk), posted on YouTube and tagged as "My Literacy Narrative project for my Comp 210 class," shows a student (presumably Wooten) in a series of still images accompanied by lively music from a Beethoven symphony. Textual tags appear throughout the video, tracking the student's reactions to what he sees. He looks for something to read, checking out books on the shelves in the library and deeming most of what he finds "boring." Suddenly, he sees in the library a set of newspapers and magazines about football, and voilà: "Reading is fun," he declares, looking into the camera and giving us two thumbs up. Admittedly, as he puts it, reading other books does not interest him as much as reading about football, but still: "Reading [with some caveats and qualifications] is fun."

Two further aspects of this video are worth comment. First, note how the video proceeds. It presents us a problem, shows us the student trying to solve that problem, and then presents a solution. The

linearity of the video isn't itself remarkable, particularly given that videos unfold in linear time. This video, however, really gains nothing by being a video. Its argument could just as easily have been rendered as a three-paragraph theme. In fact, one of the surprising elements of so many of these videos is that they are essentially short themes (often of the five-paragraph variety) delivered via video, with little attention to the rhetorical affordances of video production. Certainly, Wooten uses lively and "triumphal sounding" music; certainly, he mimes the emotions of boredom and tedium and eventual joy that lend pathos to his argument. The overall effect, however, does not compel the viewer. Second, note Wooten's own seeming resistance to the project. His enthusiastic thumbs-up at the end of the video reads more like sarcasm than anything else—sarcasm perhaps about the rather bland thesis that "Reading is fun" but also about the lackluster quality of the video. One is tempted to read Wooten's hyperbole as critique here: he must know at some level that this use of video to vaunt the values of a traditional literacy modality somehow misses the point of using video in the first place. In that context, the response commentary is fascinating; one viewer writes, "Awesome, it really is a literacy narrative." We can imagine a course context in which students post such assignments to YouTube and are instructed to peer review one another's work by commenting on them. The irony of this particular comment is that the video really is just a "literacy narrative"—not a "literacy video." Perhaps we underappreciate students' ability to understand the limitations of such assignments; the poster, after all, might very well be commenting sarcastically that Wooten has fulfilled the assignment but not necessarily made a compelling video—at least not yet. As such, the context of its production, the composition class, might work with video, but it isn't yet mining the rhetorical capabilities of video work.

Admittedly, Wooten's literacy narrative is one of the simpler videos we sampled, in terms of both concepts presented and media used. Other videos from our sample were more adventuresome in their use of media effects, but a set of common practices emerged. Other videos pick up on Wooten's strategy of linking pictures but

do so in a more engaging and compelling way. These videos often seem like music videos, with a driving sound track (generally one song) accompanied by fast-moving pictures and textual snippets to guide viewers in terms of what they see and how they might interpret what they see. Alas, such videos, particularly those that seem to be produced in comp courses, are not always as compelling as Kyle Kim's "Closer," which was produced in an upper-division journalism course (not a general education course). For instance, beautifulataxia2's "Digital Literacy Narrative" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vofvV1C3BUE) presents several different songs melded with images to trace one student's literate development. The second half of the video is dominated by the scrolling text of white print on a black background of a story the student wrote—almost as though the point of the video is to highlight, if not indeed feature, a purely textual modality.

Another common practice is the documentary-style, interview-driven narrative in which the beat-heavy sound track gives way to talking heads that comment on the student composer's development of literacy practices. Parents, siblings, and teachers comment on how the student became literate. The examples and comments seem positioned to reveal a clear trajectory from illiteracy to full literacy. A comparable kind of video is that dominated by just one talking head, in which the student simply narrates into the camera her thoughts about the topic at hand—in this case, how she became literate. In one example of this style of video, Lindsay F's "Literacy Narrative Project" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQXltgmXcFw), the composer announces at the outset that her video is not a "written" project but a video because she wants to emphasize the value of multimodality. She describes a course context in which she was asked to read various authors who have written about multimodality and multimedia literacies. Launching into a series of examples, she complains about "summer reading lists" and writing book reviews (cue dramatic music) but then lauds the possibilities of using Facebook and making videos. In one spectacular moment, she pronounces that Deborah Brandt wrote a lot of "gibberish" about literacy sponsorship, and that Brandt's real point is that we should just

"go with the flow." That is, we should embrace the different kinds of literacy practices that surround us—such as making videos. The startling thing about this video is that it praises the creation of videos as a powerful literacy practice while the entire video essentially consists of the student rambling through a prepared outline of talking points; the video dimension exists only to deliver this talking head. Granted, that talking head is praising multimodal literacy engagement. In one telling moment, however, the student actually stumbles over her words while talking about the value of engaging different kinds of media to support different kinds of learning, saying, "This is why I am writing . . . not really writing . . . I am telling you in a video." The slippage is understandable; the student is essentially talking her way through an essay about multimodality, as opposed to delivering or documenting her points multimodally.

The talking-head video certainly seems an underdeveloped use of video, and many (fortunately) are not like this. However, a dominant practice in the videos we sampled is not far removed: the voice-over narration with accompanying visuals. While Wooten's "Literacy Narrative" is not heavily narrated (we only "hear" Wooten's thoughts through textual snippets commenting on what's boring, what's not), many literacy narrative videos use voice-over narration as a leading feature. In such cases, the student usually reads a prepared text that is then illustrated with pictures and, in more advanced cases, moving images. For example, Richard Rodriguez composed a video on literacy and video games (www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1z2JkEZJss) that consists of a voice-over narration accompanied by pictures of different video games that he discusses. The overall thesis of the video is that these video games, which Rodriguez played while growing up, assisted him in learning how to read; specifically, beyond the text included in the games, the games' appeal as fantasy adventures led him to read fantasy and science fiction stories and novels. The primary evidence is a series of different examples that cumulatively accrue to support his thesis. Another such text, apesmen09's "Multimodal Literacy Project" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=raJ_eznaDLo), shows us how one young woman actually learned to write—physically. The narrative proceeds as a series of examples of different kinds of actual writing,

from printing, to writing in cursive, to composing résumés. Eventually, the composer waxes fondly about her composition class and her development of rhetorical skills, such as thinking about pathos and considering audience. Visuals serve again to illustrate major examples. In cases like these, which constitute a hefty chunk of the videos we sampled, the textual narration dominates, with videos only "accompanying." An essayistic kind of literacy is privileged here, with students (largely) composing narratives first and then *illustrating* them with visual tools. Little attempt to think through the particular affordances of visual narration seems evident. Even more telling, though, is the sense that if the textual narrations were presented alone, they would probably not be assessed very highly; they are generally fairly weak statements about literacy followed by strings of examples. We suspect, however, that the addition of the visual dimension is often evaluated as appropriately enhancing.

Our sampling is hardly exhaustive, but it is representative. Again, we do not know their original course contexts or what grades the videos received. Still, most of the videos are marked by their posters as class related, and those classes are dominantly writing or composition classes. How *do* teachers evaluate such videos? Do such videos represent what is considered "passing"? Regardless, the consistency of qualities and characteristics among them is startling. These videos function as illustrated essays—again pointing to the privileging of essayistic literacies, either among the instructors who assign video production or among the students who respond to prompts calling for video production.

We call out these particular videos not because they are especially bad but because they are especially indicative of the kind and quality of video produced for first-year and beyond composition courses that promote the production of video literacy narratives. We're not claiming that the development of such skills and such narratives and arguments is "bad." In fact, some of the texts are pretty good, at least in terms of mimicking rational textual argument in new media forms. But take Wooten's video literacy narrative as emblematic. On the one hand, the video in many ways seems perfectly fine, piecing together images, music, and text to praise literacy. Among writing instructors, who wouldn't warm to

this demonstration of one of our cherished beliefs? Moreover, we must recognize that faculty trained in writing or literary studies will certainly privilege the kinds of literacy practices (traditional essay writing high among them) in which they themselves were trained. We might be asking too much of people to set aside such a natural tendency and fully embrace the anxiety-inducing "unpredictable directions" of multimedia composing. At the same time, we must note how the video and its unrelenting linearity, its inevitable conclusion, rob it of a fuller explication and exploration of literacy. The possibilities for a rich discussion of literacy, of multimedia literacy, seem missing here, even as some technical prowess is demonstrated. There's an argument, for sure. But beyond that?

Two issues are important here. One, the videos thrill us with technical prowess, with the demonstration of abilities that seem so beyond the capability of many of us who grew up before the widespread accessibility of computers and digital video. We are tempted to praise and extol the technical while overlooking the critical and rhetorical shortcomings. Such projects look good; but what do they really say? Second, we worry that such projects work more like linear essays *on* literacy than as videos *about* literacy. It seems to us that we, as compositionists, have concerned ourselves quite a bit with how we can replicate in the new media some of the more traditional ways of storytelling, of explicating, of arguing that characterize traditional texts—texts that we ourselves have critiqued.

In many ways, the commonalities and traditional textual characteristics we have seen in these videos should not surprise us. Since they are produced in composition courses, their general emphasis on text and linear argument makes sense given what we know, not just about the privileging of particular communication modalities in comp courses but about genre theory as well. In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi argues compellingly that

> the writing prompt does not merely provide students with a set of instructions. Rather, it organizes and generates the discursive and ideological conditions which students take up and recontextualize as they write essays. As such, it habituates students into the subjectivities they are asked to assume as well as enact—the subjectivities required to explore their subjects. (144)

We believe the same generation of discursive and ideological conditions occurs when students compose not just essays but *video* essays or projects as well. The call to compose a video literacy narrative, particularly in the context of the writing course, often situates students to inhabit subjectivities that value textual production. We can see this subjectification at work, for instance, in Eric Wooten's video. At the beginning of it, he wonders if he will ever find anything good to read. By the end, he has found enjoyable reading material: cue triumphal music and two thumbs up. This video traces the performance of a subjectivity—the journey to reading enjoyment—that is in many ways evoked and even mandated by the course context in which the video is produced. What literacy instructor doesn't want to see his or her students come to enjoy reading? So, even though we do not know the specific assignment to which Wooten responds, we can nonetheless surmise that the course context conditions to no small extent the kind of subjectivity that he performs for us in and through the genre of the video literacy narrative. Put another way, Wooten may feel compelled, as Bawarshi might put it, to invent a writerly subjectivity, even as he works within the genre of the video narrative.

How might we use genre to invite students to experiment with and expand the range of subjectivities they can inhabit and perform? Bawarshi argues that "by expanding the sphere of agency in which the writer participates, we in composition studies can offer both a richer view of the writer as well as a more comprehensive account of how and why writers make the choices they do" (144). Again, our interest is in inviting "writers" in our classes to conceive not only of writing in more expansive ways, but *composing* (more generally defined) as well. We wonder what it would be like to offer a "richer view" of the composer by providing a "more comprehensive account" of the rhetorical capabilities not just of textuality but also of multimodality. Such a view requires that we look more closely at genre, and perhaps that we expand models for how students engage and play with genre, so that textual practices don't

necessarily dominate multimodal composing projects. In terms of video, for instance, if we teach video narratives in the composition class, we should consider more specifically the particular rhetorical affordances of video so that students can encounter the genre of the video narrative and inhabit it with and perform subjectivities that might exceed the textual. Bawarshi suggests that "teaching invention as a process in which writers access and locate themselves critically within genres" can enrich students' experiences of writing in particular and communication literacy in general (144). We must reenvision the processes through which we teach the genres in which we ask students to compose so that they have a strong sense of the possibilities—and so they do not (and we do not ask them to) transport the values of one genre or medium into another.

COMPOSING VIDEO AS RE-VISIONING THE ESSAY

Such reenvisioning requires a more critical understanding of what is "new" (and what is not) about "new media." As we have suggested, many in our field seem somewhat dazzled by the "newness" of new media, and being dazzled makes us less likely to see critically what new media offer us in terms of composing power. It can, more pointedly, prevent us from seeing that new media, in fact, have a history—complicated, contradictory, ultimately unknowable mixes of history. The technologies that form the constellation "new media" are never innocent and carry with them a reach of ideological DNA that exceeds our own grasp. Thus, when we attempt to fold new media into the genealogy of writing technologies, or the history of rhetoric (now "visual rhetoric," now "aural rhetoric," now "digital rhetoric"), or when we attempt to splice them into our own discussions of business and/or technical and/or professional writing, we necessarily leave out some other equally possible progenitors of new media. Put another way, we have been so taken with the concept of the new media as "new" that we forget that new media bring their own histories with them. Further, as Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick argue, to overlook the "dynamic interplay that *already exists and has always existed* between visual and verbal

texts" is to "overlook insights concerning that interplay that new media theories and practices can foster" (1; emphasis added).

Certainly, some new media texts proceed as a set of rational arguments and well-reasoned positions. Just as certainly, there are any number of other histories that offer us insight into the productive experiments and excesses of new media. For example, Jonathan has been researching and writing about the rich history of twentieth-century avant-garde and experimental film, questioning whether students' understanding and practice of communicative action and rhetorical possibility could be enhanced—even altered—if they drew inspiration from a study of early experimental film. Jackie has been researching the written and visual work of French artistic movements of the 1960s to do much the same, and has also been using the irrational, surreal "performative documentaries" of Lourdes Portillo to push her students to a critical engagement with multigenred work.

Indeed, the basic components of the "new media"—technological innovation in dissemination, the use of multiple media, the mixing and remixing of content, and the awareness of the technological medium as intimately connected to the "content," if not actually inseparable from it—all of these have characterized the last 100 years of avant-garde film as well as the art/graphic-design-as-protest movements in the last several decades and the experiments of contemporary filmmakers like Portillo. From the early media experiments of the Dadaists and Surrealists, to the rise of experimental film, to the complex and provocative media games of the Situationists, to the explosion of media-savvy pop art, the avant-garde has taught us that, in a media-saturated society, playing with multiple media in new and challenging ways is a necessary condition for (1) approaching media-overloaded audiences often dulled by media saturation and (2) expanding the rhetorical horizon of possibilities for meaning-making and critical engagement.

Let's play with the idea of possible histories. Students believe they are, in general, film savvy, and the language of movies is part of their cultural vocabulary. However, it is often a historically unrooted vocabulary, an approach to film free-floating in the present.

To challenge this presentism, we ask our students to consider the development of special effects in film, beginning with the groundbreaking work of Jean Cocteau in *La belle et la bête*. The candelabras held by hands emerging from walls, the same hands that then point the characters in the directions they need to go, literally and figuratively—such simple devices, easily imitable, were co-opted by Disney in its animated feature *Beauty and the Beast*, yet few know that Cocteau's avant-garde and pseudo-surrealist film was part of the visual inspiration for Disney animators. Cocteau wanted to access the unconscious, and his surreal images are designed to startle, to make us question what we see. We twitch in our seats; the shock shifts us. What do we see? What is real after all? These images thus perform a critical act that works through the irrational, not the rational, through the body and its sensations, not just the mind. Fifty years later, the handheld candelabra becomes the dancing candlesticks, part of the clever schtick of the Disney film, but presented in less provocative ways. Questions emerge. How do visual effects become co-opted? How do they become commonplaces? How do they change in meaning-making capacity and density over time, losing some meanings but gaining others? How do mediated images lose bodily impact? And what do we gain in recovering a sense of the history of such images?

Jackie approaches such questions by having her students analyze the work of Portillo, Mexican American documentarian and video installation artist, whose films engage difficult and complex political issues such as the ongoing murders of the *maquiladoras* and other young women in Ciudad Juárez. In Jackie's English 240 ("Writing in the Public Sphere") course at Cal State San Bernardino, for example, she assigns the following critical response:

> According to http://www.lourdesportillo.com, Portillo's film *El Diablo Nunca Duerme (The Devil Never Sleeps)* "mines the complicated intersections of analysis and autobiography, evidence and hypothesis, even melodrama and police procedure." Her film *Señorita Extraviada (Missing Young Woman)* offers a similar multilayered approach to explore *what happened*. In both films, Portillo looks at both "rational" and "irrational" explanations of tragedy, using different genres—autobiography, police "mystery" shows, poetry, *telenovelas*, and others—to present the "truth" of the situation.
>
> As Rosalinda Fregoso writes, "[making] a film about an event that is ongoing and continues to unfold is an inherently challenging undertaking" (25). As we discussed in class, finding and/or writing about the "truth" of ongoing events is also challenging—and it's this challenge that disrupts Habermas' idea of a "rational" and "logical" public sphere. For your response, I'd like you to answer one of the following questions:
>
> 1. *To what extent can you see the "complicated intersections" of genre and the "irrational/logical" explanations play out in the public sphere, especially as that sphere "works" online (in blogs, websites, news sites, etc.)?* or
> 2. *How might we productively and deliberately use different genres (and rational/irrational explanations) online to help us portray the "truth" of an ongoing situation?*

By expanding our sense of the history and context of mediated images, we gain a greater capacity to "read" those images in culturally and even politically significant ways. Yet we also recover a sense of how "texts" do a lot of different kinds of work—how they make meaning and argue in ways that defy some of our more tried-and-true compositional techniques. We recover a sense that the new media understand critical engagement in complex and sometimes nonrational ways that implicate subjectivity and the body in meaning-making.

To show how such a rehistoricized or more richly contextualized approach to new media might enhance students' production of video projects, particularly the video literacy narrative, we turn now to two quick case studies of experimental courses that have attempted to mount multimodal assignments in course contexts focusing specifically on the rhetorical affordances of new media. Both were identified, on their home campus, as "writing" or "com-

position" courses; and in both cases, the instructors consciously attempted to shift the conceptual frameworks of the comp course so that the traditions and histories of multimodal composing were privileged. At least initially, the courses focused first on histories of media, particularly video media, before inviting students to situate themselves as literate subjects in their work.

The first course comes from a lower-division writing sequence in which students, in a first-quarter composition course, focus on developing their ability to think rhetorically. The course, called "39B: Critical Reading and Rhetoric," is writing-intensive, with students contributing nearly daily to a wide variety of online and in-class writing forums. Numerous short, low-stakes assignments focus on issues of genre, audience expectation, rhetorical strategies, and critical reading. The first major writing assignment consists of a "rhetorical analysis," in which students identify the key rhetorical strategies at play in one of the primary course texts. A concluding assignment, called "Rhetoric in Practice" or RIP, asks students to compose a project (note: not necessarily a *text-driven* piece) that shows students' ability to put some rhetorical strategies to use. The project also requires an accompanying memo in which students reflect critically on the rhetorical strategies they used.

At the time of our work on this book, the RIP assignment, which accounts for 30 percent of students' final grade, reads as follows:

> For this project, you will determine the rhetorical situation of your text, and write a text to fit that situation (the RIP). Then you will write an essay that both narrates your creative and revision process and analyzes the rhetorical choices you made (RIP Essay). Together these two texts will comprise a minimum of 6–7 pages of writing.
>
> Your project must address the class theme and must be written for a "real life" audience. Drafts, peer review and revision are required elements of the assignment. . . . Multiple drafts, peer review and revision are required elements of the assignment, and are calculated into the final grade; failure to complete parts of the process will result in a lower grade. The Project and Essay together must be 6–7 pages long and be presented in MLA format, including Works Cited. A total of three (3) sources must be used to develop the essay. An Annotated Bibliography may be required as part of the final draft.
>
> Suggestions for RIP projects:
>
> - Article for a specific audience/publication;
> - Fiction or poetry;
> - Remixed written text for a new purpose or audience;
> - Review for a specific publication (book, film, game, restaurant);
> - Speech or presentation (with speaking notes) for a specific audience/purpose;
> - Sound Essay
>
> Your instructor may change the parameters of this assignment by limiting the project to a particular genre or form; please ask your instructor for more details. Expect to present your final work to the class during week 10. ("Assignments")

As we can see, the project is unique for a "writing" course in that the final "text" need not be an actual "text." Performances are encouraged, as well as collaborations among students. In the five years this assignment has been required in 39B, course directors have steadily encouraged multimodal compositions, and many students work with sound and video to complete this project. And while, initially at least, faculty had a hard time determining the "quality" of projects and grading them, enough projects have been completed, examined, and discussed that faculty feel increasingly confident assessing students' ability to demonstrate their use of rhetorical strategies, even if some of the projects might not be successful outside of the course context. Certainly, much of the grade for the project rests on students' abilities to discuss in the memo how and why they used particular strategies; after all, not many writing faculty feel comfortable grading images or oral performances, much less rap songs and videos. Moreover, these courses are not designed to teach those particular kinds of genres or media. Interestingly, however, some faculty have understood the RIP project as the central component of a course whose stated goal is "to teach

you how to approach a variety of texts rhetorically and critically," and that asks students to "compose in a variety of genres (essays, presentations, blogs, wikis, and more) for different audiences"—all as "practice [that] will increase your rhetorical know-how" (eee.uci.edu/programs/comp/39B/index.htm). Given such a mandate, the shift in some instructors' pedagogy toward reconfiguring the course as one in *rhetoric* as opposed to *writing* allows them to focus students' attention on particular modalities of rhetorical practice that need not necessarily be textual. Faculty, who include full-time lecturers as well as teaching assistants, are prompted to experiment along these lines since they are allowed to "thematize" their courses around particular figures, concepts, or issues. A local course culture that appreciates popular culture, a culture encouraged and even fostered by the course director, has created many possibilities for sections of 39B to focus on contemporary visual culture.

Not all sections of 39B are so focused on extratextual figures and modalities. Many direct students' attention and efforts to much more traditional textual production. And even sections that take popular and visual culture as their primary objects of study (and even production) contain a great deal of weekly, even daily, writing assignments, as well as the aforementioned rhetorical analysis essay. However, by examining work produced in a 39B course that takes the rhetorical capabilities of video seriously, we can see how some instructors have used their course contexts to open up possibilities for embracing nontextual rhetorical traditions and affordances.

One such section, led by Kat Eason, focused on the figure of the zombie in contemporary popular culture. Students read several short studies and articles, from both popular journalism and scholarly presses, about the zombie figure, but the majority of the course focused on the history of the representation of the zombie in movies and other visual culture. Students compared the zombie as it appears in George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* with zombies in more recent films such as *28 Days Later* and *Shaun of the Dead*. Students considered the particular historical contexts in which the movies were made, such as Romero's staging of a black protagonist in 1968 pitted against white, rural zombies seeking to

kill him. The instructor also had students examine other aspects of visual culture, such as the use of zombie images in a variety of computer and console games, including *Dead Island*. Students examined the different permutations of the zombie figure and how different cultural producers deploy it rhetorically to accomplish different ends—including making political messages and other ideological interventions in popular culture.

Given the ultimate "product" required of 39B—the Rhetoric in Practice project—savvy instructors understand that such a course is not just a course about a particular theme, but also a course about the *mediation* of that theme. They focus students' attention, for instance, not just on the figure of the zombie, but also on how different cultural producers manipulate images, sound, video, and text to create rhetorical effects. For instance, in Eason's class, students responded weekly to various blog prompts that asked them to consider the historical, rhetorical, and media features of the zombie films students were viewing. Here is a blog prompt from early in the course:

> Granted: Dawn of the Dead is a classic zombie film and all, but it's also totally 1978. No, I don't mean the cheesy latex and way too bright blood. . . . I mean in rhetorical situation. It is a creature of its time, however well it's endured. So, if Magistrale is correct, and the "best horror fiction must be viewed as contemporary social satire that reveals—and often critiques—the collective cultural fears and personal anxieties of everyday life," then what does Dawn of the Dead tell us about the state of the USA in 1978? Do you think we have the same "cultural fears" and "personal anxieties" today? What's changed? What hasn't? Does that affect the impact Dawn has on us? (Eason, "Sample")

Such a prompt focuses students' attention on the historical context in which a particular subgenre of horror film, the zombie flick, emerges and gains a viewership. Eason then moved students quickly to compare films, fine-tuning their understanding of the vexed question of just what constitutes a particular genre.

In a subsequent blog prompt, Eason asked for the following comparative analysis:

The Zombie Values Project

Purpose: to practice rhetorical analysis on a very small part of a larger piece of work. To identify and explain the rhetorical devices used in the excerpt, and relate them to your larger rhetorical goal. To focus on specifics and identify the most important evidence to use in an argument to convince an audience (your peers) that you're right. To practice the fine art of persuasion. And of course, to get practice with that whole oral presentation thing.

The Meat and Bones

As Simon Pegg's article illustrates, there is some, ah, disagreement as to whether or not 28 Days Later is a zombie movie or not. Your job is to decide whether or not it is, and argue accordingly. You may use 28 Days and Dawn as your primary sources (and anything else as secondary).

1. Take a stand. Do you agree, or disagree, with Mr. Pegg's assertion about traditional zombie values in his article? Why or why not? In other words: what are the different rhetorical purposes of turbo zombies vs. shuffling zombies? Is one more contextually relevant than the other?
2. Choose the scene from 28 Days Later or Dawn of the Dead which best illustrates your argument.
    - Explain WHAT the director is doing in that scene as it relates to your argument. This is not a recap of the action! (Zombies are slow. Romero shows us slow zombies in this mall scene because he wants us to have time to relate to and identify with the zombies themselves.)
    - Explain HOW the scene is achieving its purpose, in relation to the larger theme of the film, and how the type of zombie contributes to the film's rhetorical purpose. This may include film techniques or other rhetorical strategies. (Romero uses close-ups and tracking shots to build the sympathy of the audience for the zombies.)
3. Your purpose is both *informative* and *persuasive*. Convince your fellow classmates, but do it with evidence, not appeals to emotion and fancy graphics. ("Workshop")

Such a querying—what really makes for a "zombie movie"?—involves more than simply taking stock of fan bickering. Eason asked that students develop skills in argumentation by paying attention to how genres *develop over time*, and how the genre in its evolution plays with viewer expectations. Shifts in expectation can also signal shifts in value, opening up the possibility of interpretive analysis; for instance, what might the faster-moving zombies in *28 Days Later* signal culturally? Pedagogically, the blog prompt puts into circulation textual analysis (the Pegg article) and visual analysis (the requirement to focus on a film scene) with a consideration of genre. And just a week later, Eason asked students to consider a further twist in genre by inviting them to write about *Shaun of the Dead*, examining in particular how the film uses (but also ignores and subverts) the elements of two distinct genres: the horror film and the romantic comedy. What is at stake in making a zombie *comedy*? At what do we laugh? How has the horror of the zombie film been repurposed to create comedy—and to what effects, socially and culturally? Perhaps the issues of racism and race relations alluded to in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* have been eclipsed, at least in the popular consciousness, by other concerns. Or perhaps we have learned to laugh at ourselves. Still yet, as one student put it, the recent proliferation of zombie films seems indicative of a "post-life" culture, in which we have difficulty imagining a future that isn't about voracious, mindless consumption; hence, our laughter at a film like *Shaun of the Dead* might come from the comedy of discomfort.

We emphasize Eason's historically based approach to the genre of the zombie film because it offers students a robust way to think

about how a genre changes over time, meeting the needs and expectations of different audiences. The play of differences with and *within* the medium is generative. Genres mix and remix over time (horror becoming romantic comedy) to create new possibilities for meaning and interpretation, but they also play with their own tropes (shuffling versus turbo zombies) to signal and produce new interpretive possibilities. Such mixing offers students a powerful example for their own play as they turn to the RIP project, in which they compose their own multimodal work. For example, in "A Costly Increase" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=obFMaqdnbo4), one group of Eason's students created a Claymation video about the University of California's tuition increase. While not precisely a literacy narrative, the video nonetheless comments directly on students' concerns about the rising cost of their collegiate education. In the video, unsuspecting students receive news by mail of hikes in tuition, only to discover that the UC Board of Regents seems to be manipulating increases to create fellow zombies—perhaps a comment on the stifling (dare we say, chilling, even deadening) effects of rising tuition on students' aspirations and ambitions. The Regents' plan, however, backfires as newly zombified students attack the Board of Regents, and the video ends in a typical zombie apocalypse. The music score shifts from pathos to jaunty jingles, signaling a mix of emotions—despair, anger, delight in revenge—and the overall effect is satiric. The video might ultimately simply represent the wish-fulfilling revenge fantasies of students tired of tuition increases, but as such it also gestures toward a pressing fiscal commentary: in an increasingly interconnected economy, passing the bill on to others is bound to rebound, in some way, at some time.

In terms of media-savvy and multimodal education, we are not sure such a video could have been made had students not had extensive time to consider the particularities of the zombie film genre. Tracing the malleability of the zombie image allowed them to envision possibilities for manipulating that trope in the service of social commentary. Moreover, what is particularly compelling about such work is the deployment of video and media tropes to address *students'* concerns—something that Eason and her colleagues actively solicit in their courses. The course highlights the history of such mediation so that video becomes present as an adaptable, evolving medium through which students can inhabit a genre and begin to make it their own. In terms of literacy, these student composers articulate their understanding of their own education, their becoming literate, in a much broader economic and institutional context; therefore, we see these zombie videos as much more complex literacy narratives than the ones discussed earlier. Or, borrowing from Bawarshi: having studied the history of a particular film genre and being invited to play with it, these students inhabit a richer subjectivity that allows them to launch substantive critique, not just replicate a position held by the instructor on the value of being literate.

What happens when an entire course is devoted to examining the history and rhetorical possibilities of new media, particularly as they relate to self-representation and subjectivity? What kinds of "essays" or multimodal projects emerge from such an experience? Elizabeth Losh experimented with just such a course, "Digital Rhetoric: Becoming a Conscious and Critical User of Social Media" (https://eee.uci.edu/08f/25823). Focusing on the history of the development of new media, particularly what is now called "social media," as well as on accessible theoretical work analyzing new media, Losh developed a course in which students read about but also developed and designed their own social media sites, including blogs, wikis, personal websites, Second Life avatars, and YouTube videos. Pitched as an upper-division writing course, "Digital Rhetoric" was "designed to make students more effective creators of social media and to give them [a] more theoretical perspective about the conventions of online communication"; to facilitate such a goal, Losh encouraged students to be "active content-creators of curricular online materials." Her "Reading and Viewing Assignments" were broad-ranging but attempted to give students a sense of the historical development of thinking and theorizing about new media. The course culminated in a YouTube video project, for which students were asked to compose a video:

> Write a proposal of 200–500 words that describes your YouTube video essay, which must be on a topic related to digital communication or social media that is relevant to the issues raised by the course. Explain what other videos are available on YouTube on similar subjects and list at least one possible YouTube video that you might choose to respond to in order to get your video viewed by members of the general public.
>
> Think about if you want to use images, footage from creative commons sources, or fresh footage that you have shot yourself. Give the reader information about your argument, the central claims, and the evidence that you plan to present. As you work on the script and editing, you may find that this basic proposal needs to be revised, but it is important to start with a sense of rhetorical context, audience, and purpose. (Losh)

Losh staged the assignment so that students not only made an initial pitch, grounded as a possible response to another video, but also submitted images, a script, and video "drafts" for instructor and peer review. As a whole, the course context of "Digital Rhetoric" provided a substantially rich environment in which students learned about media and also participated actively in a wide range of social media while reflecting on that participation and putting their reflections into conversation with their emerging sense of the development of media over time. The advantage of thinking across multiple media is clear: students could see the different rhetorical possibilities afforded by different media, weighing what a blog or wiki could do versus a video or Facebook page. Losh's final assignment then asked students specifically to put into practice and reflect on their own emerging media literacies—or, as the course subtitle puts it, to think about how they were becoming "conscious and critical users of social media." Creating a video for YouTube seems an appropriate culminating experience in that video combines image, sound, and text—a robust multimodal project. Since students were asked to consider their video as a potential response to another video, they had the opportunity to further, critique, or comment on an existing conversation about social media.

We can catch a sense of the richness of this commentary in a video essay composed for this course. This video, "I.D. / self :: the new 'real'" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BhEj-tI66E) challenges us to rethink what being "literate" means, particularly in terms of our engagement with new media ecologies (newartisticdirection). On the surface, "I.D. / self :: the new 'real'" is about one student's ("Johnny's") engagement with the new media, particularly Facebook, AIM, and *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). After an introduction that raises some intriguing questions about identity on the Internet, the video proceeds with a clever explication of the three major domains through which the student engages others via the Internet and various multimedia platforms. Throughout, the composer uses the visual cues associated with different platforms—the blue bands of Facebook, the chat bubbles of AIM, the gothic scripts of WoW—to signal what self is on display. A conclusion, though, raises more questions than it answers. By the end of the video, we are unsure who the "speaker" here is. Who is "Johnny"? A high school student? A college student? Is he a he, or perhaps a she? The point of the video, despite its apparently linear format (intro, three examples, conclusion), ultimately seems to be to raise even more questions about the possibility of knowability in digital spheres than it sets up to address in its introduction. The video is not about clarifying, being rational, revealing "truth." It's about reflecting on the media itself and the process of subjectivity becoming mediated. We are reminded, when watching this video, of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe.* This is not a pipe. Essentially, the video says, *This is not Johnny.* We see bits and pieces of the whole, but never the whole—which perhaps doesn't even exist. In the contradiction, in the fantasy, in the elisions—we see and don't see; truth is both revealed and hidden. Indeed, what is perhaps most startling about this video is how it uses the temporal linearity of the video medium, unfolding as images in time, to double back on itself, so that, as the video proceeds, you steadily question everything you've seen.

We might argue that this video performs *metonymically.* That is, its constituent elements—from the opening and concluding framing shots to the different visual presentations of self—constitute

pieces that allude to an absent whole. This video suggests to us a new way of configuring the relationship between compositional production and the audiences such production serves. Composition, in its traditional forms and genres, often privileges the metaphor over the metonym and thus often works against the metonymic possibilities of some new media. For instance, in many of our courses, we strive to have students develop arguments that are "like" full-scale debates, rational encounters in the public sphere—that argue through points as though there were different interlocutors hashing out an issue, and as though resolution were potentially possible. Wooten comes to value literacy through a journey, with a beginning, middle, and end, metaphorically mimicking the move from ignorance to knowledge. In contrast, a metonymical approach to argument offers us the bits and pieces but never pretends that an understanding of the whole is either possible or desirable. Johnny's video shows us a "whole," a "totality," a "real" identity that finds metonymical figuration in the various "cases"—but the case studies, proceeding as a mimicked five-paragraph theme, empty themselves of meaning by the end of the video. We are led to question self-revelation itself: "they reveal something about me . . . don't they?" Johnny's various cases, assertions, and bits and pieces of evidence invite us, ultimately, to question what we know—and that questioning proceeds more through surprise, contradiction, and fantasy than through debate, argument, and reason. The video also points out what is finally incommensurable in our understanding: it embraces contradiction and irresolution as powerful ways of knowing.

Both Eason's and Losh's courses push the boundaries of what composition's engagement with new media can—and probably should—look like, even as they enact two different approaches. Eason's course layers a rich rhetorical understanding of new media into a thematic focus on a powerful figure—the zombie—that moves across multiple media. Losh's course works directly with conceptualizations of new media rhetoricality, taking the authoring of new media projects as the thematic content of the course itself. In both cases, composing has become radically remediated away from the primacy of written and print-based texts and toward the

inherent multimodality of communication in contemporary public spheres.

We can see such multimodality at work in the public sphere in another video, this one not produced for a course but intended nonetheless to be pedagogical in a broad sense, and one that attempts to expand our sense of the "literate," or how one can speak publicly about issues of personal, and ultimately political, import: LaReina DelBarrio's response to Barack Obama's decision to have Rick Warren offer the invocation at his first presidential inauguration (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgXpMVpAZfA). DelBarrio's voice-over slides in and around a variety of provocative images—flags waving, Obama smiling, and drag queens dancing. The video performs simultaneously a sense of queer eroticism and queer outrage about Obama's choice of Warren, who had been pivotally involved in the 2008 overturning of marriage rights for California gays and lesbians.

Note, though, that there is little direct argument here: the video is more about mood. It is about pain, resentment, and other emotions that cannot be squared against political realities; it is also about those political realities that reveal themselves to be compromised, even contradictory. The images speak to this incommensurability in the juxtaposition of the drag queen, the little red schoolhouse, and the pervasive American flag flapping in the background. The embracing gestures of the drag queen collide with the static images of Obama, while the voice-over narration and the text on the screen speak to each other of outrage, shock, and disbelief. More provocatively, the eroticism of the drag queen, slightly bent over as she wiggles her ass at Obama, suggests both a "desire" for recognition, for an intimate embrace into the public sphere, and a sense that we have been bent over and fucked once again. At the end of the video, the drag queen covers her eyes, mimicking both the sense that justice should be blind and that, in this particular case, the reality of injustice is too difficult to witness. Granted, this is hardly the traditional literacy narrative, but we include it as an appropriate counter to the foregoing video literacy narratives because it offers a complex set of textual, visual, and multimodal statements on the

difficulties of finding pro-queer expression—of being legibly literate—in a society embracing homophobic and anti-queer policies and positions. In other words, it uses multimodality to challenge and hopefully expand our sense of the literate, and of the struggle some face to be understood and heard in the public sphere.

We wonder, as an imaginative exercise, what these videos would look like if they were rendered to us as "proper essays." What we would find are most likely essays that would (1) diminish or even potentially resolve the contradictions offered in the videos in favor of an agreeable, Rogerian-esque compromise ("We disagree but are not disagreeable") or (2) perplex us with textual experimentation that would not look like a traditional essay, that would proceed more through montage, rant, diatribe, and less through reasoned debate. How, for instance, might Johnny's video not work if it were an essay—either a five-paragraph essay (that it mimics) or a more aesthetic, Ezra Pound–like montage? These imagined essays might rationalize the various issues they raise. We might, for instance, read an essay that offers reasons for why Obama did what he did. But those reasons wouldn't do justice, we believe, to the necessary outrage, even the necessarily perplexing and perplexed eroticism of DelBarrio's video. A rationalizing argument can't quite encompass the embodied sense of disappointment, hurt, rage, and even disgust that is a crucial part of understanding a queer response to Obama's politicking.

SOME FINAL CUTS

Our examination of video in this chapter allows us to consider how we might question the legitimizing moves of our discipline, the ways it attempts to make itself whole and sound, and how certain histories, certain excesses, and certain compositional possibilities are left out. We believe that remixing histories, even (or especially) those excessive histories, is a starting point for interacting more generously with new media—not to colonize, or subsume, or contain, but to celebrate composing in all its multiple potentialities.

Certainly, not all students may be able to compose the kinds of pieces we have lauded here. We must ask, however, how might

students' critical vocabularies of media gain in sophistication if they can trace the possible histories of new media, of technology, of composing? And how might experimentation with media practices allow them access to ways of knowing that are not tied to rational exposition or narrative development? Such explorations of alternative, nonrationally developed kinds of arguments may enrich their understanding of how arguments are made, how textual and visual material can function rhetorically in ways beyond logos, how affect is rhetorically usable, and how such communicative action can be a critical enterprise that often tests the boundaries of intelligibility—of what is known and knowable. If students have the chance, even in small ways, to see how a Jean Cocteau or a Lourdes Portillo or a LaReina DelBarrio expand the "grammar" of film, then they have the chance to become more literate consumers of video, and perhaps more sophisticated prosumers as well. At the very least, what we offer them is a chance to think beyond the formula—the narrative exposition, the developed rational argument, even the clever parody—to explore possibilities of textual, visual, and multimodal production that could be rhetorically richer.

Along such lines, we return briefly to the video discussed at the very beginning of this chapter, Kyle Kim's "Closer." In the instructor's reflection on his student's work, he comments that Kim shows us a picture at one point of Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, noting that this is one of the few substantive moments in which Kim uses a "textual" bit of meaning-making in his film. The instructor clocks this moment, having hoped for more of them, but appreciating it nonetheless. We might argue, though, that the instructor has missed a greater point. Kim's use of Kesey's novel—thematically appropriate, as the instructor notes—is also *historically* rich and suggestive. For just as Kesey creates a first-person avant-gardist narrative to critique mid-twentieth-century notions of self-awareness and intimacy, so too does Kim, on a smaller scale, perform likewise for his generation, using one of its favored modalities—the music video. An argument is being made here, but it is one that proceeds by valuing and forwarding not rational and linear argument but iteration, citation, association, and references to the *irrational*. It

also references its own indebtedness to traditions of experimental aesthetic production, even if these are largely textual. In this way, "Closer" riffs on the genre of the literacy narrative; its studied use of multiple literacies is precisely what makes it so interesting as a video—and so interesting as a "text" that forwards its maker's awareness of the avant-gardist traditions in which he composes.

Ultimately, we might suggest that we need to reconsider more critically our disciplinary divides, particularly those that we use to legitimate ourselves. We understand the importance of authoring "composed" essays; we don't deny the very real and material need to help students develop the kinds of compositions—the kind of composure—that make them legible in the marketplace, not just of ideas but of hard currency. We also do not deny the necessity of composing such texts ourselves (more on this in Chapter 3). But we want to also make room for the kind of "writing"—and the kind of subjects—that challenges such composure, that offers rich and (yes) excessive ways of thinking and writing. We hope that our critique in this chapter allows you to consider how we might collectively, as a discipline, question the legitimizing moves of our discipline, the ways it attempts to make itself whole and sound, and how certain histories, certain excesses, and certain compositional possibilities are left out.

3

Prosumerism, Photo Manipulation, and Queer Spectacle

> "There has always been more to the image than meets the eye."
> —David Blakesley and Collin Brooke

ONE OF THE KEY RHETORICAL AFFORDANCES of new media in general is the capacity for active writerly participation in complex public spheres. As Kelly Kinney, Thomas Girshin, and Barrett Bowlin write, this is an important signifier of the "third turn to the social":

> [While] "the social turn" represents many things to many people, we see three distinct shifts in this so-called turn. The first . . . emphasizes teaching writing and learning how to write as collaborative, interactive processes. The second shift grows out of the first, but, rather than focusing primarily on instructional practice, as James Berlin writes in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures,* it examines and critiques the signifying practices that shape subject formation—and, by extension, the discipline—"within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions" (83). While scholarship represented by the third social turn does not ignore classroom pedagogy or critical theory, it also does something quite more: it takes as its starting point embodied activism.

While Kinney and colleagues do not point specifically to new media as a playground for embodied activism, it is not too difficult to find a resonance here with social media actions; note, for example, the Twitter feeds that fed the Occupy Wall Street movement, or the large-scale Facebook and Twitter uproar that resulted from the